

My Partner, My Guardian Angel

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My partnership with Koko, my chocolate Lab, began about two and a half years ago. I remember this time well for I was knee-deep in my Masters program studying to be a Marriage Family Therapist. I worked mainly with children, and I originally acquired Koko to use as a therapy dog. I specifically chose a Labrador retriever to assist me in this type of work because they are reliable, social, and enthusiastic.

We started our basic training the first week we were together with a personal trainer who used to work with guide dogs. Koko progressed wonderfully, and after several months of intense one-on-one work with our trainer, we felt he was ready for his first job, which was through my internship with mental health.

Koko's first week at this job was very productive and shed lots of light on my future with him. As we worked together as a team, we learned certain skills, such as the use of Koko's social skills and unconditional love or acceptance for people that can make someone feel so good.

One of Koko's most successful stories had to do with a boy who was still soiling himself in second grade. I had been working with this child for the past few months, but he never wanted to discuss his wetting problem until Koko was around. When I involved Koko, it seemed to become interesting and non-threatening. I shared with him that my Lab was also experiencing a problem with "potty training," and I asked my client if he could help Koko. The boy's eyes got big, and he ran over to the chalkboard and began to draw a picture of Koko going potty on the grass. He was helping Koko but learning at the same time that others may have the same problem or have common feelings regarding such issues as he did.

More recently, Koko and I have been



volunteering at several different retirement homes and children's facilities. Koko has developed several tricks over the years that the residents of these homes find to be very entertaining. They include crawling, waving, rolling over, flipping a cookie off his nose then catching it in his mouth, and playing dead with all four paws up in the air. I find that Koko's presence gets the older residents talking about their past, which often brings a smile to their face!

I am one who believes that everything happens for a reason, and I truly believe that when Koko and I met it was pure fate. My relationship with Koko has changed dramatically over the years. After working as my therapy partner for a year during my Masters program, I was diagnosed with epilepsy. Although my original plans were to use Koko in therapy with children, I was shocked to discover that I may personally need him.

After much training and passing certain tests – such as the Temperament Test and the Canine Good Citizen Test – Koko has become my service dog, or more specifically, a seizure-response dog. To better explain my situation, I have what

are called *auras*, which are warning signs about one minute before each seizure. When I feel this aura, I say, "Koko seizure," and he comes and lies at my feet. This then prevents me from moving about as my seizure begins and progresses because I will stay with Koko.

My seizures have also developed into an amnesia state to where I don't recognize anything or anybody but Koko. He is the single living entity that keeps me connected to this world while I'm having a seizure. Due to this, I feel much more secure and confident with him as my partner while I continue living with this disability. I have also taught Koko how to retrieve the phone for me in case I need to notify medical assistance.

Finally, I would have a hard time simply getting out of bed every morning if it were not for my Lab. We are currently attending weekly classes for training on all the before-mentioned skills. The classes also provide opportunities for discussion of questions or problems as they arise.

Koko is so much more than a dog with therapy assistant tools and seizure response skills; he is truly my best friend. I don't know how I could make it through this disability without him. I just recently found out that I also have what is called *cortical dysphasia*, which has made my seizures much worse. The doctors at UCLA want to perform brain surgery soon.

But as I turn to Koko sitting by my side, I can't help but smile. He looks at me with his big brown eyes and wags his tail. I hear that famous *thump thump* of his tail, and I'm reassured that everything will be okay, or at least it is for that moment.

I wrote this story to share the many abilities Koko has; but as I'm sure you know, this breed is often very skilled. Koko seems to impress me daily with what he is able to understand and accomplish. Now that Koko and I have been struggling through this disability together for so long, I feel that we have more to offer to the community as a team. I look forward to that day when I get my life back and we can give in return to the children through animal-assisted therapy. But with all of the current anxiety and stress in my life, the only thing I know to do is thank God for Koko, my guardian angel. 